

kidscreen HOT 50 2023

No stones unturned

In a year when Hollywood's dual strikes affected productions in unprecedented ways, and major streamers pulled kids content from their platforms and canceled projects in mid-stream as they grappled with adverse macroeconomic conditions, the kids entertainment biz had much more to contend with in 2023 than usual.

From shifting production and release schedules, to finding new buyers and co-production partners, to rejigging value-versus-risk strategies, the industry has had to adapt like never before. But despite all of the obstacles, many companies dug in and somehow managed to shine brightly with their work in broadcasting, production, distribution, licensing and digital media.

With streamers cutting back on content for kids, the industry recognized the ongoing importance of linear broadcasters by putting PBS KIDS on top in the broadcasting category. It's the first time in Hot50 history that a linear channel has taken the crown, following eight consecutive titles for Netflix and two for Disney+ in 2021 and 2022. Sky Kids in the UK also made the broadcasting top 10 for the first time ever on the heels of launching its first ad-free kids channel. Both achievements are a testament to the growing importance of traditional TV for kids.

Aardman, WildBrain and 9 Story all scored four Hot50 rankings this year with their holistic businesses. Aardman was ranked number-one in the production category for the first time, and 9 Story Distribution International took its second consecutive distribution title. Aardman delivered its long-awaited sequel *Chicken Run: Dawn of the Nugget* to Netflix for a December 15 global premiere. And 9 Story acquired seven series for distribution and placed 1,700 half hours of new content on AVOD services.

No brand made a bigger splash in licensing this year than Barbie, so it was almost a no-brainer that Mattel would own this Hot50 category. But the toyco also announced plans to launch print and digital Barbie titles in 2024 under its new publishing imprint.

Rounding out the Hot50, PBS KIDS moved up one spot to take the crown in digital media. This year, the pubcaster advanced its audio strategy by launching the first original PBS KIDS podcast (*Keyshawn Solves It*), as well as expanding its streaming library by 64% to encompass more than 890 free episodes.

Big congrats to all of the 2023 number-ones; to Hot50 first-timers Cheeky Little Media, Titmouse, Headspace and Banijay Kids & Family; and to the rest of the finalists. We can't wait to see what everyone has in store for 2024!—Jeremy Dickson

BROADCASTING



PBS KIDS rules

Strengthened by new civics content and more diverse characters, PBS KIDS makes Hot50 history in broadcasting.

A linear kids channel has won this category for the first time, after years of streaming domination by Netflix and, more recently, Disney+. “[The win] means that linear still matters,” says VP of content Adriano Schmid. “Staying true to our mission of meeting kids where they are—on all devices and platforms—means keeping a linear broadcast available and accessible to the majority of homes across the US.”

This past year, PBS KIDS responded to the post-pandemic learning loss by launching new animated series *Rosie’s Rules* and *Work It Out Wombats!*, which respectively delve into critical topics like civics and computational thinking. *Rosie’s Rules* also expanded the pubcaster’s

culturally diverse character lineup by introducing protagonist Rosie Fuentes, a bilingual Mexican-American girl from suburban Texas. But it wasn’t all new faces for the channel, which also celebrated the 10th anniversary of beloved series *Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood* with a special fan-voted programming event that led into the premiere of season six.

“In a year that saw so much uncertainty in terms of kids content being pulled from platforms or productions being canceled, we stayed on our path,” says Schmid. “We continue to focus our resources on keeping smart, funny series, shorts and games available to all kids, rain or shine. I think that’s appreciated in the industry.”



BBC Children’s

In the wake of a 2022 reorg that saw BBC Children’s In-House Productions fold into BBC Studios Productions (now BBC Studios Kids & Family), the British public broadcaster got back to work doing what it does best—greenlighting a wide variety of engaging content, including factual series *Deadly Mission Shark* for CBeebies and CBBC, live-actioner *Treasure Tales*, and seven new half-hour docs for its *My Life* series. The Beeb also announced its intention to commission three new 2D-animated projects (including *Duck and Frog*, pictured) from its inaugural Ignite accelerator program, as well as partnering with Animation UK on the Animated UK meets Europe initiative, which brought five UK shows to Cartoon Forum after the region’s forced absence in 2021 due to Brexit.



Apple TV+

Buoyed by big wins at the 2022 BAFTAs for titles including *Wolfwalkers* (Feature Film), *Lovely Little Farm* (Preschool Live Action) and *El Deafo* (Content for Change), the streamer has landed in third on the Hot50 broadcasting list for the second year in a row. Apple TV+ beefed up its kids and family offering in 2023 with new Peanuts orders *Camp Snoopy* and *Snoopy Presents* specials *One-of-a-Kind Marcie* and *Welcome Home, Franklin*, all produced in partnership with WildBrain. It also greenlit DreamWorks Animation's *BE@RBRICK*, based on a toy line from Japan, and renewed The Jim Henson Company's Emmy-winning series *Fraggle Rock: Back to the Rock* for a second season.



Sky Kids

British broadcaster Sky makes its Hot50 debut this year with its Sky Kids brand. The Sky Kids app has featured on-demand children's content since 2016, but this February, Sky expanded its reach by launching an ad-free Sky Kids linear channel for the first time ever, after audience data found that it was needed in the market. Featuring originals and acquisitions, the channel has been busy commissioning new shows such as *MC Grammar: Rap Tales* and renewing others like Aardman's *The Very Small Creatures*.

Netflix

Following a tough fiscal 2022, the streamer has been bouncing back this year, increasing revenue by 7.8% to US\$8.5 billion in its latest quarter and adding 8.76 million new paid subscribers. On the content front, accolades have continued to roll in for live-action teen drama *Heartstopper* and CG-animated series *Maya and the Three*, which picked up five and three trophies respectively at the inaugural Children's and Family Emmy Awards. New tween/teen series *Wednesday* was also a smash hit, landing in second place on Netflix's global top-10 most popular TV seasons of all time with more than 252 million views.



ABC Australia

Australia's public broadcaster returns to the top 10 driven by the massive global success of homegrown animated series *Bluey*, which was recently ranked by Nielsen as the second most-streamed show in the US with 1.4 billion views. Domestically, fans have viewed more than a billion minutes of the show's 2023 episodes to date on the ABC's broadcast channels and ABC iView, according to OzTAM. In other home-turf achievements, the broadcaster launched a US\$3.4-million funding initiative in March with regional screen agency SAFC to back South Australian content made for its airwaves.



Disney+

After wearing the Hot50 broadcasting crown for two consecutive years, the streamer has landed in seventh place in 2023. Despite the drop and ongoing cuts to content spending, Disney+ gained seven million subscribers in Q4—bringing its global tally up to more than 150 million. Additionally, *Sneakerella* and *The Mysterious Benedict Society* won Children's and Family Emmys, while *Ms. Marvel* grabbed a TCA Award for outstanding achievement in family programming.



CBC Kids

The Canadian children's broadcaster and its French-language counterpart, Radio-Canada, continued to engage kids on the platforms they use. CBC Kids programming racked up 900,000 hours streamed on GEM and 15 million views on YouTube, while Radio-Canada hit a record 15% share on television. As for fresh content, CBC Kids launched American Sign Language series *Silly Paws*; book adaptations *Mini-Jon and Mini-Maple* and *Dylan's Playtime Adventures* were greenlit; and CBC selected a pair of animated kids series for development funding as part of the Kindred ABC/CBC Animation Collaboration.



TVOKids

The Canadian public broadcaster had another solid year of diversifying its slate with more inclusive content. Highlighting different abilities, season five of Canadian Screen Award-winning *All-Round Champion* aired with a para-athlete cast; animated preschool series *Griffin and Turner*, featuring a character with Down syndrome, was greenlit for development; and new series *Sunny's Quest* premiered, showcasing Black Canadian kids produced by an all-Black crew. TVOKids also relaunched its smart TV app to reflect current programming and customized playlists.



WildBrain

Canada's WildBrain Television network continued to champion Canadian production this year, staging Family Channel premieres for Shaftesbury feature *Life With Luca* (a spinoff of Family Channel's popular teen sitcom *Life With Derek*); Canadian-Italian co-pro *Home Sweet Rome!*; and *I Woke Up a Vampire*, a new series developed and produced by Family Channel in association with Netflix. The broadcaster also debuted *We Are Family*, a monthly prosocial series that shares stories of real Canadian families and their achievements.

PRODUCTION



Aardman looks good in its first production crown

Delivering a sequel to its first-ever feature film and collaborating with Lucasfilm helped put the Bristol-based studio on top this year.

Star Wars and chickens ruled the roost and propelled Aardman from runner-up in the Hot50 production category in 2022 to taking top spot this year. A collaboration with Lucasfilm gave the studio a chance to create its own unique take on Star Wars with the “I Am Your Mother”

episode in anthology series *Star Wars: Visions Volume 2*. Aardman also hatched some notable IP extensions this year, delivering feature film *Chicken Run: Dawn of the Nugget* to Netflix (a sequel to its first-ever movie, *Chicken Run*, released back in 2000), and building the *Morph Thingy-Ma-Bobstacle Course* interactive game (in which kids use their bodies to navigate Morph around obstacles) as a launch title for Sky Live.

“We feel our success is down to this mixed slate, which allows opportunities for talent to create, engage and develop at all levels in a busy and creatively exciting studio environment,” says Sarah Cox, executive creative director of development. “This is all underpinned with the ambition to combine our love of comedy with strong storytelling, relatable characters and—slightly obsessively—the highest quality of craft.”



Ludo Studio

It's all about *Bluey*. The success of Ludo Studio's flagship preschool series in streaming, live entertainment and social media drove the Brisbane-based prodco up six Hot50 spots from 2022. In this year's high-light reel, *Bluey* became one of the most-watched acquired series on Disney+, and its live show premiered in the US on the heels of a hugely successful Australian tour. The popular blue heeler pup also joined TikTok (as the first ABC and BBC kids brand on the platform), where it already has more than two million followers.

Atomic Cartoons

Jumping up four production category spots from last year, the Canadian studio is currently producing and working on international sales for 26 x 22-minute original series *Mermicorno: Starfall*, which Warner Bros. Discovery has picked up to air on Max in the US. On the service side of its business, Atomic animated 19 shows for 17 clients this year, including big-brand projects such as *Marvel's Spidey and His Amazing Friends* for Disney and *My Little Pony: Make Your Mark* for Hasbro and Netflix.



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9 Story Media Group/ Brown Bag Films

It was a big year for 9 Story Media Group and Brown Bag Films' live-action division, with BBC and BYUtv premiering *A Kind of Spark*—which centers around an autistic girl who solves a historical mystery about witches—in March and then quickly renewing it for a second season. Overall, the company maintained 16 active pipelines in Dublin, Toronto and Bali that delivered 238 half hours of content, including animated series *Rosie's Rules* for PBS KIDS and *Eva the Owlet* for Apple TV+.

Fred Rogers Productions

The US prodco behind *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* secured season-two renewals from PBS KIDS this year for animated series *Alma's Way* and live-actioner *Donkey Hodie*. And to identify and support new writers from underrepresented racial groups, Fred Rogers Productions launched Writers' Neighborhood, an initiative for providing emerging talent with mentorship and networking opportunities. The company also worked on making its content more accessible by partnering with the Described and Captioned Media Program to create ASL captions.



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Sinking Ship Entertainment

The Canadian studio charted a course for success by delivering three series this year: *Jane* (Apple TV+), *Builder Brothers Dream Factory* (Treehouse) and *Beyond Black Beauty* (Amazon Freevee). It also has three new shows coming down the pipe: *Dino Dex* for Amazon and TVOKids; a UK version of *Odd Squad* for BBC, TVOKids and PBS KIDS; and an upcoming TVOKids mystery/literacy series called *Wordsville*.



Titmouse

Titmouse makes its Hot50 debut after a busy year of new deals and deliveries. All told, the LA-based studio produced more than 10 series in 2023, partnering with Rovio on *Angry Birds Mystery Island* for Amazon Kids+ and Prime Video, and making 2D-animated series *Jentry Chau vs. The Underworld* for Netflix.

Cheeky Little Media

A Hot50 first-timer, Australia's Cheeky Little Media turned 10 this year and scored season-three renewals for *Kangaroo Beach* and *Vegeosaurs* (which got its start at Kidscreen's Asian Animation Summit in 2018). The studio also built an Unreal production pipeline for *Vegeosaurs*, with Epic Games and Screen Australia providing funding for training talent to use the engine.



Mattel TV

A pair of live-action unscripted series have landed Mattel TV on the Hot50 production list for the first time. *Hot Wheels: Ultimate Challenge* and *Barbie Dreamhouse Challenge* expanded the reach of both popular brands. And on the cinematic side of things, Mattel TV and Nickelodeon greenlit a sequel to *Monster High: The Movie*, which has continued to perform well on Paramount+ since launching in October 2022.

BBC Studios Kids & Family

Restructuring seems to agree with BBC Studios Kids & Family, which is featured on the Hot50 production list for the first time this year after scoring greenlights for third and fourth seasons of live-action teen drama *Phoenix Rise*. Other 2023 achievements include launching season three of animated preschool series *Jojo & Gran Gran* and staging a live adaptation of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* at the Globe Theatre in London.



DISTRIBUTION



9 Story's distribution unit reigns supreme

Despite a challenging year, several new catalogue additions and steady AVOD sales have helped the company put value over risk.

9 Story Distribution International had another massive year, acquiring seven series, including two from South Korea: *That Lion Show* (Kakao) and *Hero Inside* (CJ ENM, Million Volt Animation Studios, Tencent Video and YGG Global).

Navigating around budget cuts at some of the industry's major buyers, the company turned to AVODs and did a whole lot of business, launching 1,700 half hours of new content on those platforms in the past year. The distributor also had presales success on the live-action

side, with 9 Story's *A Kind of Spark* attracting early commitments from ABC Australia, France Télévisions and CBC Kids.

"This was an all-hands-on-deck year," says Alix Wiseman, SVP of distribution and acquisitions. "We experienced the same challenges as everyone else in the business, but our resourceful and smart team worked to achieve maximum value with minimum risk, which proved to be a good strategy. A special shout-out goes to our digital team, which turned over every stone to explore possible revenue streams."



CAKE

The London-based distributor climbed six spots in the rankings on the strength of numerous deals, including scooping up the global rights to popular YouTube Original series *Super Sema* and selling all three seasons to Sky Kids. It also added new shows such as *Lulu and The Help You Crew* (Reel FX) and *Toru Superfox* (Animoon and Letko) to its portfolio, and placed 1,000 episodes of animated content in the Latin American market through package deals with Warner Bros. Discovery, Canela Media and Canais Globo. Meanwhile, CakeStart, the company's joint-venture with Kickstart Entertainment, finished production on multi-cam live-action series *Pretty Freekin' Scary* and delivered for a June 2023 launch on Disney Channel in the US.

Jetpack Distribution

A perennial Hot50 contender, Jetpack Distribution expanded its catalogue by 16% this year to hit 1,800 half hours, adding new titles like Snipple Animation's *The Singalings* and Outfit7's *Talking Tom Heroes: Suddenly Super*. The company is also getting more involved in development and production financing, putting new shows from studios such as Daily Madness and JAM Media into its pipeline. And beyond content, Jetpack launched a licensing and brand management division that's helmed by former Hasbro and ITV Studios exec Stephen Toye Green.



Sinking Ship Entertainment

The Toronto-based producer/distributor sold high school-based drama *Phoenix Rise* to ABC Australia, YLE (Finland) and NRK (Norway) within weeks of the series making its market debut with a MIP Junior 2022 World Premiere. And Apple TV+ debuted Sinking Ship's eco-themed mixed-media series *Jane* in April. The company also sold 475 hours of programming into more than 40 countries this year. Among these deals, *Dino Dana* went to NHK (Japan) and Youku (China); and *Odd Squad* to France Télévisions, CBC Gem (Canada) and RTBF (Belgium).

WildBrain

The Canadian company had an active year in sales, signing its largest Degraasi deal ever and sending 400 episodes from the popular tween/teen drama franchise to Prime Video in Canada, Australia and New Zealand. In the US, Amazon Kids+ scooped up a package of 132 episodes from shows including *Strawberry Shortcake: Berry in the Big City* and *Polly Pocket*. And WildBrain also had success with Chinese streamers Youku and Senya, which respectively bought *Teletubbies: Ready, Steady, Go!* and *Teletubbies Let's Go!*.



Sesame Workshop

The House of Elmo maintained distribution momentum across the pond this year, selling its new CG-animated STEM series *Sesame Street Mecha Builders* to Channel 5's Milkshake! block and Super RTL in Germany. To support children and families affected by the Ukraine crisis, it also launched localized content about dealing with big feelings on YouTube and free-to-air broadcaster PLUSPLUS.

Aardman Animations

Aardman's distribution arm is sitting comfortably in seventh place this year after acquiring three new pre-school shows: *Ready Eddie Go* (Hocus Pocus), *Yukee* (Score Draw Music) and *Mitten and Shoe* (Matinai). The iconic British animation studio also refocused its AVOD and FAST channel strategy (doing business with twice the number of distribution platforms) and added an additional 17 hours of content to its portfolio.



Banijay Kids & Family

The Banijay division makes its Hot50 debut on the heels of expanding its distribution team and kids content portfolio, which now boasts more than 2,850 hours of programming. Banijay Kids & Family acquired Beyond Kids' entire catalogue last January, including Netflix CG-animated musical toons *Beat Bugs* and *Motown Magic*. It also secured best-in-class linear and VOD partners for flagship series *Silverpoint*, *Totally Spies!* and *Shasha & Milo*.

Guru Studio

The Toronto-based company returns to the Hot50's distribution top 10 after three years off the list, selling CG-animated preschool series *123 Number Squad!* (Omens Studios) and 2D-animated adventure toon *Big Blue* (Guru Studio) to broadcasters including Canal Panda (Portugal) and MBC (Middle East). Guru also partnered with Future Today to launch a FAST channel in the US for its flagship series *True* and *the Rainbow Kingdom*.



Australian Children's Television Foundation

It was a pivotal year for the ACTF's live-action portfolio, with Werner Film Productions' Aussie comedy-horror series *Crazy Fun Park* (10 x 30 minutes) getting picked up by the BBC (UK), Hulu (US), VRT (Belgium) and Momo Kids (Taiwan). And US nonprofit First Nations Experience bought a package of Indigenous-led shows, including a live-action adaptation of author Leonie Norrington's *Barrumbi Kids* novels.

LICENSING



It's a Barbie world for Mattel

The toyco's unstoppable film star unseats WildBrain as the new queen of licensing.

Thanks to *Barbie* movie tie-in demand across all retail categories, Mattel had a huge year, earning every step of its Hot50 climb from ninth spot in 2022 to number-one in 2023. More than 165 licensing deals drove its doll brand's blockbuster push worldwide, from apparel collections with Gap, to pink-themed treats at Burger King Brazil, to inline skates and protective pads from Impala Skate that recreate the neon '80s outfits featured in the film.

Mattel also spent the year getting into position to launch its own publishing imprint, kicking the initiative off with new digital stories for Barbie, Hot Wheels, American Girl and Thomas & Friends that were released on its Caribu app throughout the year. Its first range of physical books is due out in 2024.

"We successfully turned the world pink as Barbie fans around the world anticipated the iconic Mattel IP making its way to the big screen for the first time in history," says Josh Silverman, the toyco's EVP and chief franchise officer. "It is a thrill to be honored as *Kidscreen's* top licensor in this year's Hot50 as we continue seeing the great response from fans and the industry to this momentum for Mattel."

9 Story Brands

Toronto's 9 Story Brands is this year's runner-up in the licensing category, on the strength of consumer products programs for Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood and Karma's World. To celebrate Daniel's 10th anniversary, the company worked with its long-standing partners to create plush (Jakks Pacific), special-edition books (Simon & Schuster) and browser games (PBS KIDS). It also inked its first deal with Pact Organic to bring Daniel's iconic red sweater to life in a new apparel line for kids. Meanwhile, Karma's World thrived with several new retail activations in US Walmart stores, Toys "R" Us locations across North America and an experiential bus that's currently touring the UK with ASDA.





Aardman Animations

Aardman is hot off a win at the Gift of the Year Awards for the Build Your Own Wallace & Gromit rocket kit from Brit toyco Paper Engine. This 135-piece kit is based on a spacecraft featured in the 1989 film *A Grand Day Out*, replicating in cardboard all of the rocket's internal details and components. Aardman also launched the first-ever Wallace & Gromit escape room in Bristol this year in partnership with Locked In A Room. The 60-minute *A Grand Way Out* experience challenges teams to solve puzzles—themed around iconic moments from the franchise's canon—to help Wallace remember the code that unlocks his workshop.

WildBrain

Despite losing the Hot50 crown to Mattel, WildBrain's brands still packed enough punch at retail this year to land it in fourth place. Partnerships were the name of the game in 2023, and WildBrain CPLG inked new deals with collectibles giant Funko and Chinese retailer MINISO for Strawberry Shortcake licensed products. Not to be outdone, Peanuts Worldwide sent Snoopy into orbit on NASA's Artemis 1 spaceship, and the famous beagle also tackled the time continuum as a new smartwatch face option for the Apple Watch.



Spin Master

The Toronto-based toyco racked up eight nominations at this year's Toy of the Year awards, making the shortlist with its *PAW Patrol: The Mighty Movie* tie-in toys, GUND sustainable plush and brand-new digital pet Bitzee. Meanwhile, Spin Master's Swedish game studio Toca Boca expanded its role-playing game *Toca Life World* into lifestyle product categories, partnering with Toronto's Juniper Creates to launch a DTC apparel range for the IP.

BBC Studios Kids & Family

Move over, Bluey—BBC Studios is shining a spotlight on 2D-animated preschool series *Hey Duggee*. Its Kids & Family division partnered with Live Nation and Kenny Wax Family Entertainment to produce the IP's first stage play, *Hey Duggee The Live Theatre Show*, which won an Olivier Award for Best Family Show and booked 100 dates in 24 UK theaters. BBC Studios also shot a Transforming Duggee Space Rocket toy from Golden Bear into space, sparking a viral sensation that has generated more than 40 million impressions overall.



Sesame Workshop

The Workshop made several moves this year to position Sesame Street as a multi-generational lifestyle brand. They included developing a street footwear collection for kids and families with Vans, and breaking into adult collectibles with ReAction figures of The Count and Bert & Ernie from Super7. Oscar the Grouch also took to the skies as United Airlines' first chief trash officer to promote sustainable aviation fuel in a new digital and social media campaign.



Jazwares

Continued growth for Squishmallows helped the toyco move up two spots from last year's 10th-place ranking. Jazwares expanded the brand's consumer products program, signing on more than 45 new licensees this year, including Hasbro and Relatable for the first Squish board games, and Komar for sleepwear and tablet cases. Since launching last year, the Squishmallows game on Roblox has amassed more than 70 million plays on the gaming platform.

Sinking Ship Entertainment

Thanks to some new location-based moves, the Toronto-based studio returns to the Hot50's licensing list after a two-year absence. Sinking Ship developed an LBE program for Odd Squad with park design partner Falcon's Creative Group, which had just begun rolling out the franchise's first attractions at its Melia Resort in Punta Cana at press time. The company also signed a book deal with Mango Publishing to create new titles based on *Jane* (Apple TV+) and *The Fabulous Show with Fay & Fluffy* (WildBrain).



Paramount Consumer Products

Rounding out the Hot50 licensing list is Paramount Consumer Products, which was last featured in 2016 as Nickelodeon Consumer Products. PAW Patrol, the licensing division's top-performing preschool property, continues to drive sales at retail. And more than 400 new licensees signed on to develop products for the TMNT franchise's latest CG-animated feature film, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Mutant Mayhem*.

DIGITAL MEDIA



PBS KIDS aces the exam

The public broadcaster put the cool in school this year, reclaiming its number-one spot on this Hot50 list by producing digital content that helped kids in the US build a stronger foundation in social studies.

"We're always challenging ourselves to think about the opportunities digital platforms bring for new forms of storytelling, and our producers really stepped up," says SVP and GM Sara DeWitt.

This year, civics lessons were aged down with *City Island* (Augenblick Studios), an online series of 2D-animated shorts that tackle key topics like community, city planning and conflict resolution. And on the audio side of its strategy, the pubcaster rolled out a first original podcast (*Keyshawn Solves It*) and added new seasons of *The Arthur Podcast*.

PBS KIDS' streaming library grew by 64% this year and now offers more than 890 free episodes from legacy shows including *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* and recent hits such as *Alma's Way*.

"It's an honor—and exciting—to be recognized for innovation that is so central to the PBS KIDS mission: creating non-commercial content that meets kids where they are, considers their unique needs, and promotes a passion for learning more about the world around them," says DeWitt.



Moonbug Entertainment

Building more touchpoints defined Moonbug's big year, which included a notable foray into gaming. The Candle Media-owned company teamed up with Outright Games for *CoComelon: Play With JJ*, a playdate-inspired title for Nintendo Switch that offers everything from singalongs to interactivity. And in one of its biggest partnership moves of the year, Moonbug collaborated with Cameo Kids to bring fan-favorite characters like Blippi and Cody into the lucrative world of personalized video messaging. Amid all of this expansion, the company still maintained an exceptional reach on YouTube, where its portfolio of channels averaged nine billion monthly views this year.

Aardman Animations

Jumping up four spots, the British company powered up its online presence by hitting 10 million subscribers with its Shaun the Sheep Global YouTube channel, and revitalizing the Timmy & Friends channel (1.74 million subscribers) with an array of new preschool content. Aardman also made waves by moving some of its key IPs onto emerging platforms—from Wallace & Gromit's *The Grand Getaway* VR experience, to a Roblox game based on new toon *Lloyd of the Flies*.



WildBrain

The numbers certainly back up WildBrain's repeat fourth-place ranking this year. Its digital studio (formerly WildBrain Spark) surpassed 1.2 trillion collective watchtime minutes on YouTube, driven by the strong performance of legacy properties like Caillou (which generated 81 billion minutes alone). The division also refreshed another '90s IP with the debut of its *Teletubbies Let's Go!* digital shorts, tapping into motion-capture and Unreal Engine animation in the production process. And WildBrain's media solutions team helped shape branded digital content for major partners like Paramount and Disney on platforms including FAST channels, the metaverse and gaming worlds.

Sesame Workshop

Continuing its longtime efforts to support mental health, Sesame Workshop launched *Elmo's Mindfulness Spectacular*, a star-studded YouTube special about learning to manage big feelings. Elmo and his furry friends also teamed up with Pinkfong this year to put a spin on the catchy "Baby Shark" song—garnering more than 18 million views with the cover tune's video. The nonprofit is also busy exploring vertical content in the wake of launching an official Sesame Street TikTok account in 2022 that now has more than half a million followers.



9 Story Media Group

The Canadian company extended Rosie's Rules into gaming with the rollout of three popular games for the IP over the past year. (In particular, *Rosie's Slime Store* has become a smash hit and remains one of the top 10 most-played titles for PBS KIDS.) 9 Story also powered up two of its legacy brands, launching a Garfield FAST channel on Pluto and revamping the Barney & Friends YouTube channel to achieve a 15% year-over-year increase in viewing. Overall, the company's YouTube business experienced a 57% uptick in watchtime in 2023.



Mattel

While Barbiemania played out in theaters worldwide, Mattel was also busy bringing the IP to life digitally—earning the toyco its first-ever spot in the Hot50 digital media ranking. Netflix's *Barbie: Epic Road Trip*, packed with interactive elements, allowed viewers to steer the story. Meanwhile, back-to-school season kicked off with a groovy music video collaboration between Barbie and YouTuber A for Adley that racked up more than nine million views and a 2023 Gold Telly Award.

Headspace

The Hot50 first-timer made it onto the list with a slew of multiplatform projects tackling SEL. Notably, Headspace partnered with popular comedian/influencer Lilly Singh for *The Mindful Adventures Of Unicorn Island*—a YouTube Original animated series that breaks down mindfulness for kids while championing South Asian representation. And the studio's expertise in producing calming audio content to help kids relax at bedtime was also on full display in the season-two launch of its *Goodnight, World!* podcast with Sesame Workshop.



The LEGO Group

Viewership across the company's FAST and AVOD channels was up by 5,000% this year, buoyed by an expansion into 18 new territories. LEGO also mined all of its signature elements (from humor to colorful visuals) in a first batch of TikTok content, and its YouTube channel has surpassed 30 billion views—and four billion in the past year alone. The company also embarked on a unique partnership with the popular Lofi Girl YouTube channel for a "chill beats for LEGO building" music mix.

Dubit

Returning to the digital media top 10 after a two-year absence, Dubit used emerging tech to entertain and uplift this year. The research firm/app developer rolled out its *Loooptopia* Roblox world for clothing company H&M, even hosting a *Stranger Things* collaboration within the game. Dubit also worked on a playkit that integrates AR and VR to help kids "rehearse" having an MRI scan, with research backing up the tool's effectiveness at helping to lower stress. **K**

